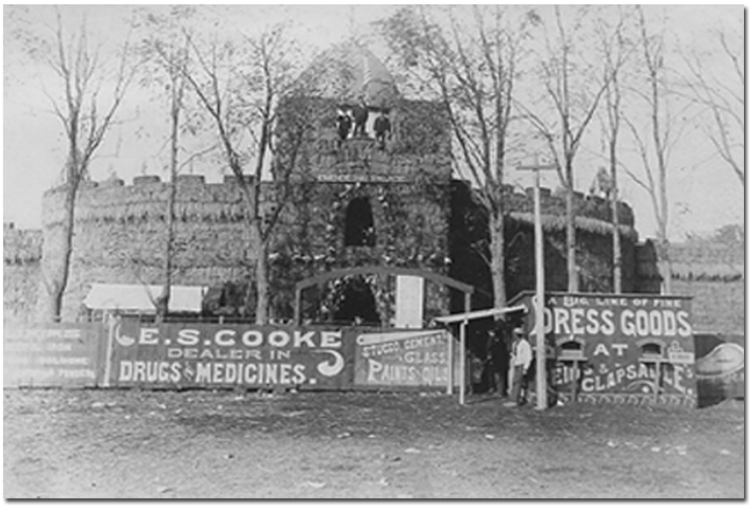
Momence Hay Palace

(1890 -1891)



Charles McNichols was the originator and prime mover in the work of building the Hay Palace which was exhibited in Momence in the years 1890-91, and which was attended by at least forty thousand people each year, it being one of the achievements of which Momence is justly proud. Charles McNichols came to Momence in 1887 and in 1891 purchased the *Island Park News* and changed its name to the *Momence Press.*

The Chicago Evening Journal Sept. 3, 1890

By: Charles McNichols, Editor Momence Reporter

The Momence Hay Palace was built entirely of baled hay, with straw trimmings, a towering castle with imposing battlements, vaulted roof, and a lofty dome.

The building is 206 feet in length, and 166 feet wide in the center. The central, or main hall, is a perfect circle 103 feet in diameter, flanked to the north, south and west by wings, 50 feet wide.

A circular gallery, 18 feet wide, sweeps entirely around the main hall, from which there is an unobstructed view of the vaulted roof, and to the top of the immense central dome 87 feet from the ground. This dome, with a circumference of 80 feet, is covered with a thatch of bright straw.

The frame work of the big towers on the corners of the wings is also covered with thatch made from various species of marsh grass.

The walls of the building are built entirely of baled hay, with just enough baled straw used in trimming to make a pleasing contrast of shading and color. Battlements of baled hay are carried over the roof, giving the appearance of a feudal castle. The quaint little windows, looking more like port holes, add to the appearance, furnishing ventilation only.

Interior light is supplied by hundreds of electric lights, which dot the trusses supporting the immense roof and dome. They cluster along the inner circle of the gallery.

It is intended to cover every post, pillar, and truss of the interior with grasses, evergreens, corn, wild verdure, flowers, etc.

This Hay Palace Exposition opens October 11, 1890. The primary object of the exposition is to make a display of varied products, and resources of eastern Illinois, and western Indiana, in hope of attracting investments, and immigration from the older Eastern States.

The exhibits will include the products of the farms, factories, forests, mines, quarries, and of the arts, domestic skill, and the accomplishments of the people of the district in music, oratory, and manual training. Among the special features will be an immense aquarium, containing every species of fish captured in the Kankakee River, and the Wabash River; a collection of Mound Builders, and of Indian Relics from Indian Mounds in Kankakee, above Momence; an attempt will be made to exhibit the geology, botany, and ornithology of this district.

In the Machinery Hall, special effort is being made to collect the latest improvements in haying machinery and tools, ditching, and road machinery, and for laying and making tile, etc.

Orators of national reputation will be on hand for a speech each day in the spacious auditorium, together with a concert of vocal and instrumental music. The Shubert Club of Cleveland, Ohio, male vocalists have been engaged for the entire season. A brass band from Brazil, Ind., will furnish music; several other bands will do duty on special days. Solo singers and musical specialists are being engaged for variety to the program. Outdoor amusements are as follows: On Saturday, October 4, a fireworks tournament; Monday, October 6, a bicycle tournament; and a baseball tournament the three following days. A variety of other athletic sports and games for purses and medals.

The grounds for these sports have been prepared at considerable expense, and everything will be in condition for 1st class sport.

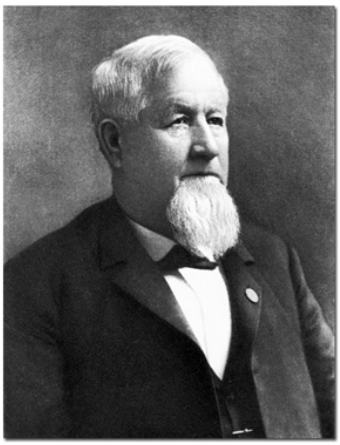
The palace ground, but five squares from the business center, is on a high and dry location. Surrounded on three sides by rows of walnut trees, planted more than 30 years ago. The owner of the grounds has resisted the opening of streets through the tract, and since the “boom” struck Momence, it has been well surrounded by residential property.

It is the intention of the management to have the exposition opened jointly by Governor Hovey of Indiana, and Governor Fifer of Illinois. The second day will be mostly for reunion of the surviving veterans of the 76th Regiment, Illinois Volunteers. Their annual camp fire will be held in the auditorium in the evening.

On the third day, General John M. Palmer speaks, and the local Democrats are already hustling to give the old man an ovation. Amongst the speakers on succeeding days will be Congressman Payson, Owen, and Cannon, ex-Congressman R.G. Horr and others. A conditional promise has been received from President Harrison to be present on or about October 6. Senator Carlisle has expressed hopes of attending.

Governor of Indiana
Alvin Hovey

Governor of Illinois
Joseph Fifer

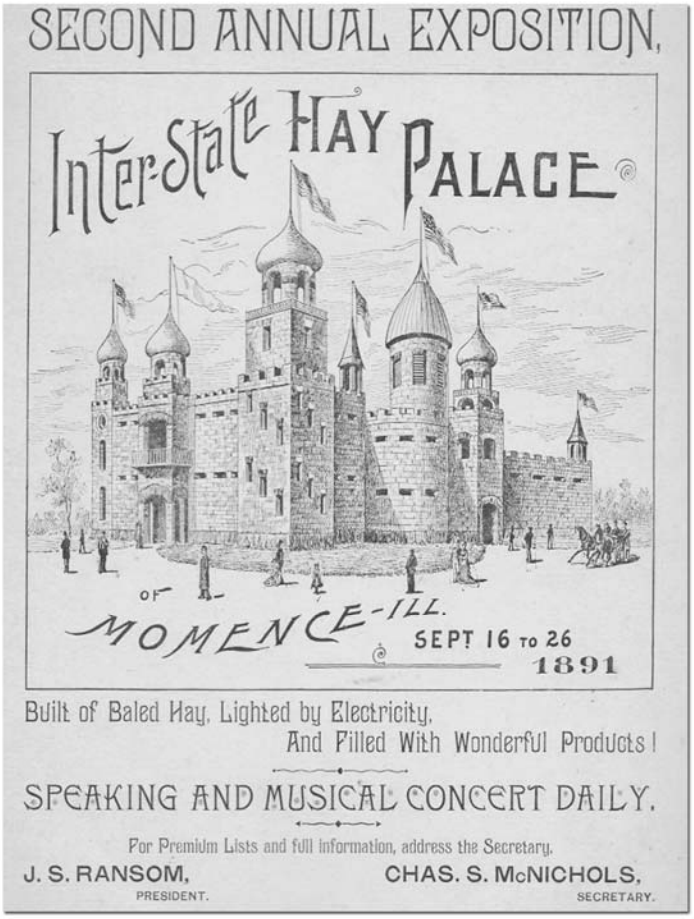


General
John M. Palmer

The project of the Hay Palace was conceived last April by Charles S. McNichols of the Momence Reporter. A stock company, with capital of $7,500, formed and incorporated. They elected McNichols, secretary, D.S. McKinstry, general manager, and John Ransom, president. One hundred sixty Momence business men and citizens were stockholders, and many generally gave liberally of time and money to aid the undertaking.

Some shareholders were from Kankakee and St. Anne. Much aid was furnished through friendly aid of the press of the district as the novelty of the idea captured them.

It is the first attempt at holding a palace exposition east of the Mississippi River, and the first exhibition building ever constructed of baled hay anywhere. Certainly no more appropriate building material could be used in what is perhaps the greatest hay producing section of America.



Charles McNichols

Souvenir Coins from the Hay Palace 1890 - 1891

Source: Portrait and Biographical Record of Kankakee County, IL 1893,Chicago Evening Journal Sept. 3, 1890